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PRE-HISTORIC EPIC,

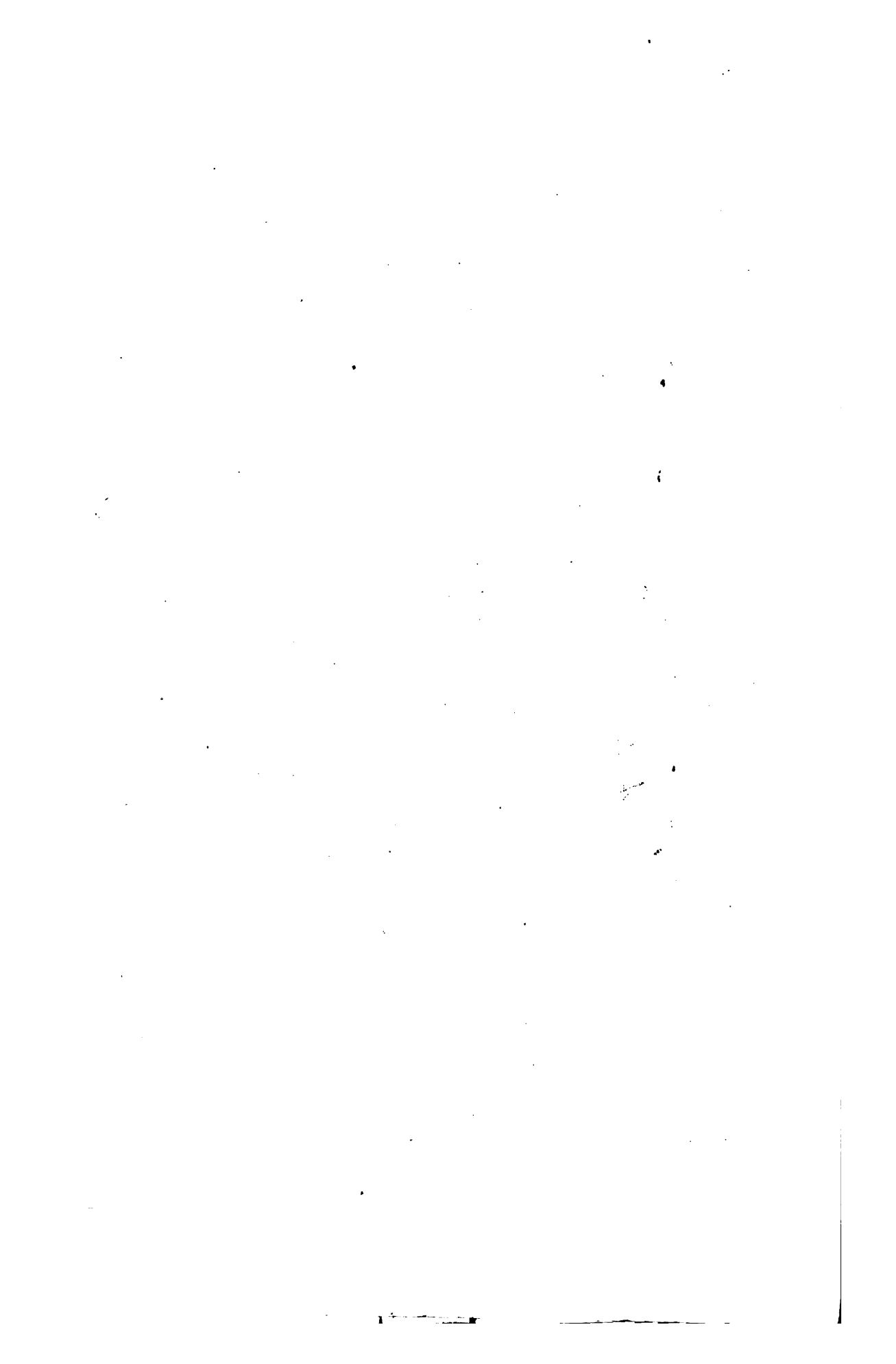
—BY—

HENRY PHILLIPS, Jr.

(FROM THE PENN MONTHLY FOR MARCH, 1882.)



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A PRE-HISTORIC EPIC.

AN able writer has well remarked that "there is a point of view from which it can be said that there is very little nonsense in the world." The rubbish of one generation becomes the cherished treasure of the next; the simplest phenomena of human nature of most routine recurrence can be invested with the most attractive interest and dignity by one touch of that magic which makes the whole world kin. The creative powers of the mind have not come to an end with the days of living mythologies, and the thoughts and experiences of our pre-historic ancestors are frequently shadowed forth with more or less distinctness from the gloom in which the lapse of ages has enshrouded them. They have taken up their lodgment in the popular mind and fancy, and, like the spot upon the hand of *Lady Macbeth*, will not "out." They crop out, and come forth, and "peep through the blanket of the dark," at most unexpected times and places. The unlikely is that which ever must come to pass.

We have been led to these reflections by the consideration of a poem well known alike to the young and the old, the learned and the ignorant, but one whose true origin and signification appear to have failed in catching the attention of those who, for so many years, have been dealing with the fragments of pre-historic antiquity. It can be denominated an epic *in petto*, under whose slender form may possibly lurk the germs of some profound revelation. It does not stand alone in the annals of literature, but is a member of a class, all equally familiar, and the embodiment of a wisdom no less profound and sagacious than that which appears in the Proverbs of Solomon.

To bring before the infant mind the conception of vast truths,—to infuse into it ideas of the fitness of things,—to improve the understanding before the mental flower has put forth its first tender sprout,—to teach the child too young as yet to imbibe instruction in any other manner,—are the ends sought to be accomplished by such productions. They are both amusing and edifying, and present under the garb of recreation the wholesome knowledge necessary to be acquired during the progress of life, but which can never be better nor more thoroughly learned than in the nursery.

These poems are known to the initiated as "nursery rhymes;" and we have chosen a specimen of one of the most striking, believing that it will fully substantiate our encomia:

" Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep,
And doesn't know where to find them;
Let them alone, and they'll come home,
With their little tails behind them."

Whoever wrote these rhymes, bore in mind the maxim of Horace, and plunged at once into the middle of his subject. No stilted exordium befitted the present occasion; no loud invocation of the gods or of the muses. The tale is of a lowly character, and is treated in the ordinary language of every-day life. Pastoral simplicity is depicted before us as there arises the image of *Little Bo-Peep* in all her Arcadian artlessness, while with crook and pipe she tends her fleecy flocks. No lineage had she,—no ancestry; a poor shepherdess, who lived with her tender lambkins, herself as meek as the meekest of her flock. Such was one of the earliest conditions of mankind. Who can tell what of ancient fable may be here enshrined? what vestiges of a long-forgotten literature? what great person of antiquity may be symbolized as *Little Bo-Peep*?

Little Bo-Peep bespeaks our sympathy on account of her diminutive size; a poor little creature, entirely unfit for the rugged cares of this world, entirely unfitted for toil, for adversity. How, then, is she to sustain the terrible catastrophe which has now fallen upon her? But great minds soar above petty tribulations, and doubtless our heroine will prove to be one of these.

" Has lost her sheep."

Where they her own, or were they her master's, or were they the property of a friend? How, when and where did the misfortune happen? The calamity is kept concealed from us, mindful of the dictum of Horace to remove from the sight of the audience all horrible and dreadful occurrences, although a narrative of such events is afterwards fully permissible. What is lost in scenic effect is gained in good taste. Had we before us the active cause of the present disaster, we might, perhaps, not feel so strongly for the unhappy victim as we do now that it is veiled in impenetrable darkness. Tempted by greener herbage, have they strayed from the beaten path-way into the unknown vast? or has

some Cacus descended from his mountain den, and violently seized upon the grazing drove?

In a pastoral age, cattle constitute one's sole wealth. Their loss is irreparable. That such serious stress should have been laid upon this loss, goes far, even were other intrinsic testimony wanting, towards proving the great antiquity of this poem and of the events which it commemorates. In the earliest times, the first cares of mankind were for the earth which supported them and the domestic animals by which they were surrounded. Not until later ages were sung the praises of captains, heroes and demi-gods. The matters close to man's proximity were those which in such rude times entirely engaged his attention.

But, to return :

" And does not know where to find them."

We are lost in admiration and wonderment at the great and consummate art of the poet. The distress is real,—not feigned. There is no deception practiced. Our sympathies still cling to the unfortunate shepherdess. If she *did* know where to find them, it would not be a matter of the slightest moment to us whether she had lost them or not. The mind of man is prone to suspicion ; and the evidence thus given that the loss is a real and *bona fide* one thoroughly dispels any latent doubts. Who knows? The pastor, although apparently innocent and guileless, may have sold her master's lambs or given them as a peace-offering to some wooing Lubin? Who knows but that she may somewhere have craftily concealed her own herds, that out of the sympathetic gifts of her sorrowing friends she might start anew in the world? The history of Conkey Chickweed, though of recent date, but reflects the shadow of similar occurrences in times long gone by. For the operations of human mind are invariable, and, had not the poet been careful to give us this information of the entire ignorance of *Little Bo-Peep* as to the locality and whereabouts of her flocks, we might, perhaps, wrongfully have suspected the shepherdess of some felonious action.

The drama which we are considering is a perfect one in its development ; it has an opening, it has a middle, and it has a close. It has a demonstration of the facts, it has their concatenation, and it has a *dénouement*. We are now at its climax.

Imagine, if you can, the horror of *Little Bo-Peep*, as, preparing to return homewards at even-tide, she finds that she has lost her sheep! We, dwellers in large cities and inhabitants of later stages of civilization, can but poorly take into our minds this scene of dismay. What is she to do? In vain she skurries hither and thither; no traces are to be discovered of the missing fugitives. In vain does she discourse upon her oaten pipe the simple melodies with which she was wont to attract her loving herds to their keeper; nymph Echo alone responds as she ceases for a moment her dalliance with the great god Pan.

Night is coming rapidly on, and it is time that *Little Bo-Peep* should be in motion towards her humble domicile. Distractedly she tears her flowing locks, and madly does she beat upon her breast with her clenched fists. She finds no consolation. Her more fortunate friends and neighbors gather around her to offer their conjectures and advice. (We have no reason, however, to suppose from the progress of the story that they make an endeavor or offer to repair the loss.) Some tell her to scale yon lofty mountain, whose snow-capped summit towers above the clouds; others, to search in the dark and dismal ravine which frowns at her feet, where black and yawning chasms threaten death to all intruders. All is confusion and dismay.

At last, an old man,—we may suppose, tottering on the verge of the grave with age and infirmity,—the Nestor of the settlement, grown wise in many generations of men, steps forward with feeble treble, piping voice, and unsteady gait, to give to *Little Bo-Peep* such treasure of knowledge as he has garnered up in his long voyage of life:

“Let them alone.”

Was there ever anything more sublime than the admonition thus conveyed,—the caution to remain quiet in adversity,—the inutility of questioning the decrees of fate,—the advisability of inaction when one's exertions would prove but futile? What a golden lesson to learn! The three maxims for which the Eastern dervish received such enormous remuneration fade into insignificance before the vastness of the wisdom embodied in this advice.

“Let them alone.”

As they had wandered off by themselves, so they must come back by themselves; as their wrong-doing had been of their own

free-will, so from themselves must come forth the reparation. Alone they had vanished, and alone they must return. And note again the consummate skill of the sage in dissuading the shepherdess from the search. Each sheep has straggled off by itself; it might be necessary to follow some fifty, one hundred, or even a thousand, different paths, each one divergent from the other. A life-time would not, perhaps, suffice for *Little Bo-Peep* to recover her departed treasures. Alone they all were, each sheep by itself, and *Little Bo-Peep*, that most unhappy of herdswomen, all alone by herself too. Alas! alas! alas!

"Terque, quaterque miser, quem aspera fata premunt!"

The good results that were to flow from old Nestor's advice, he, in continuation, plainly set forth:

"And they'll come home."

What a happy consummation! Instead of being obliged to seek her scattered herd through hill, dale, brook and meadow, clambering up inaccessible heights, sweeping through dreary valleys and impenetrable quagmires, morasses and thickets, the flock will be forced to seek its shepherdess. Each one, alone, individually, before night's sable mantle has long enveloped the face of the earth, will be retracing its steps *toward its home*. Home, sweet home, even for a sheep, has its attractions! And now the end crowns the work! The interposition of the *deus ex machinâ* has satisfactorily solved the difficulty. A unique manuscript which we possess shows the result that happened from the good advice of the venerable sage!

"At midnight, on her bed of straw,
Bo-Peep was dreaming of the hour
When she her flocks to pasture drove,
Nor feared, nor cared, for summer shower.

"The hour passed on; Bo-Peep awoke,—
She heard a sound she knew full well;
The sheep were clustered 'round her cot,
And each one rang its little bell."

And yet to what perils might not they have been exposed whilst thus away from their natural protector? We can imagine how fondly *Little Bo-Peep* caresses and plays with each sheep; we can hear their responsive bleats of pleasure and their joy at their return, only equalled by that which fills her breast! No impu-

tation of dishonesty can now rest upon her hitherto stainless character. She is *integer vitæ, scelerisque pura*! Her loss is redeemed.

But why that shade of sadness in her eye? She has not yet examined the flock, to see if during their absence they have suffered any wrong,—if anything has been feloniously abstracted from their persons. But, no!

“With their little tails behind them.”

It is all right. They have experienced no injury. As they went, so have they have they returned. Good old Nestor,—how well did he know the workings of nature!

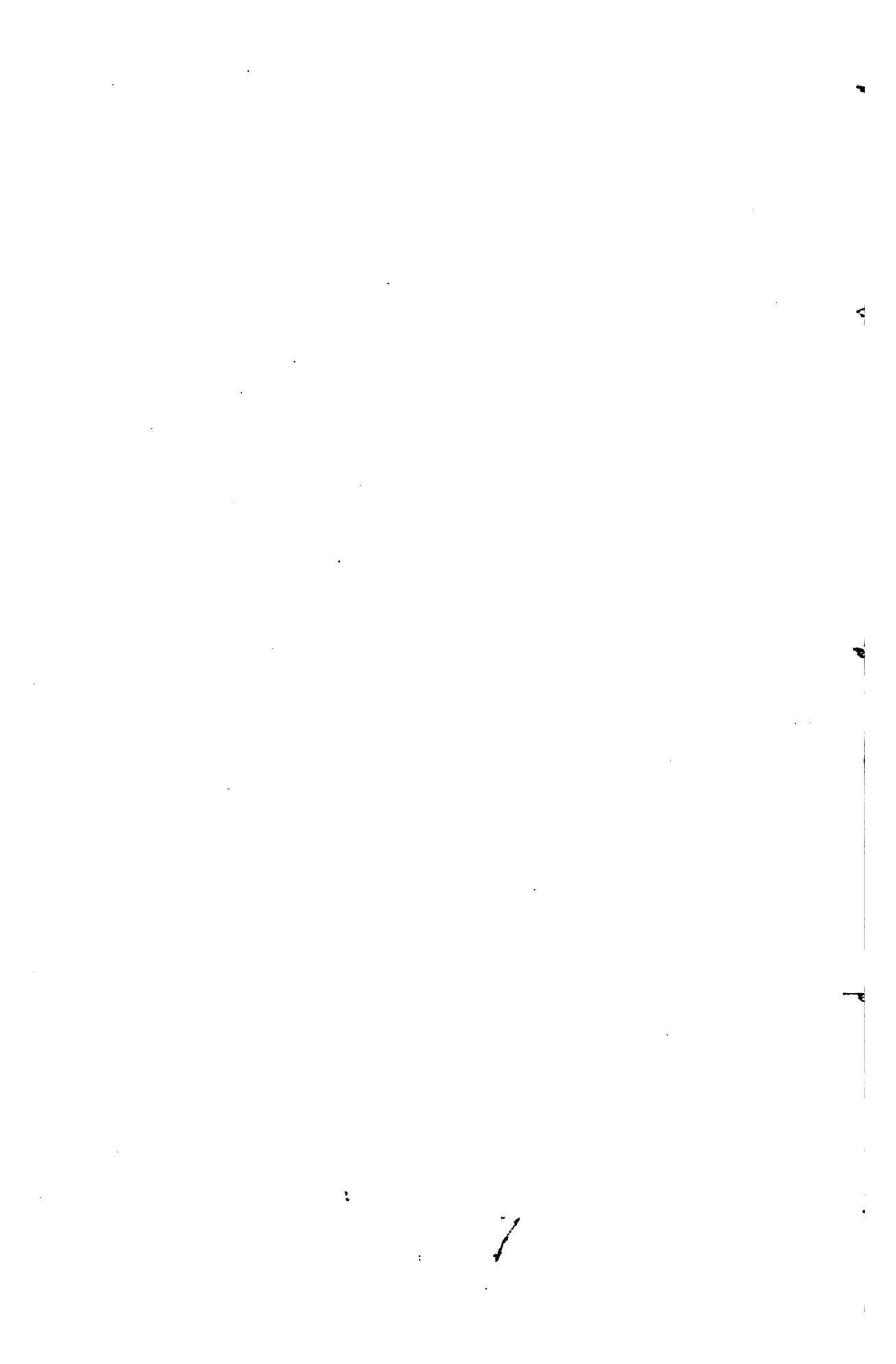
And truly the poet is justified in the estimate he has placed upon the value of such a return,—with their tails intact; for we may fairly suppose, from the stress laid upon the circumstance, that these sheep were of the race mentioned by Herodotus, whose tails weighed several hundred pounds, and to enable the poor beasts with comfort to carry such a burthen it was necessary to construct small four-wheeled carriages, which they dragged behind them, with their tails gently reposing thereon.

It is evident, from the examination which we have just given, that this poem was composed in the *very earliest days of the human intellect*. Bucolic poetry is always pleasant and sweet to the child of nature. The simplicity of the language, the homely nature of the events which it professes to record, the choice and treatment of the subject, point strongly to pre-historic times,—perhaps even earlier than those of Homer. We dare not indulge the conjecture that to the blind bard is to be really attributed the parentage of this small but perfect epic. Inspiration, expression and invention are all present. Nothing is lacking, save the author's name. The simplicity of style is certainly his, not as it appears emasculated in the flowing lines of the Twickenham poet, but as it resounds in the sonorous dialects of the Hellenic tongue. But the supposition, unfortunately, is a mere hypothesis. It is safe to assert, that, of all the great men whom our English-speaking race has produced, but very few—if, indeed, any at all,—grew up to manhood without having been familiar with this poem at some period or other of their existence. What influence its teachings of patience under adversity, of neighborly charity and kindness, may have exerted upon their *post-nursarial* life, it is impossible to conjecture. But,

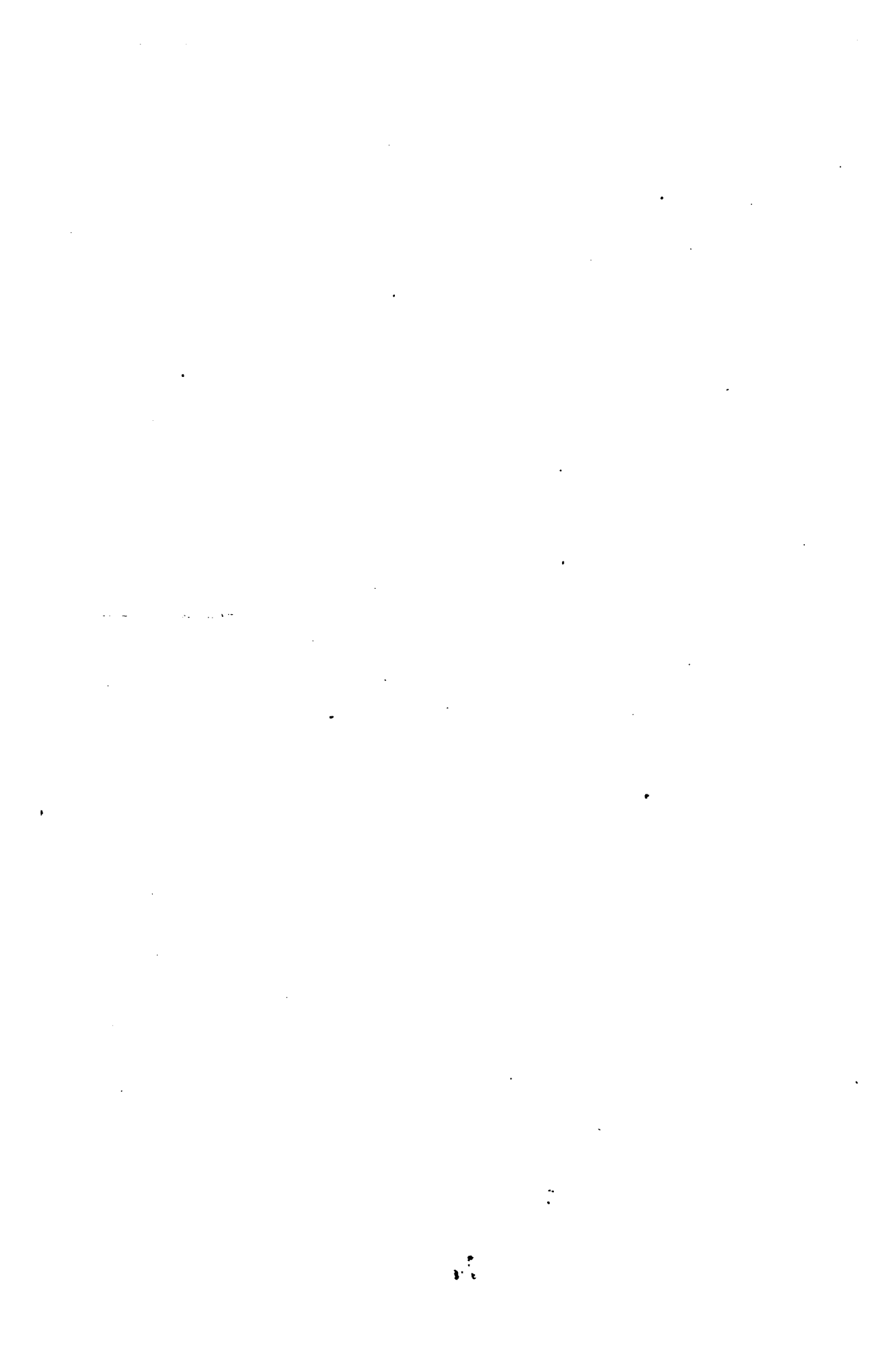
when we see a man distinguished for his philanthropy and goodness,—whose whole aim is to benefit mankind,—whose daily walk is in the path of purity and rectitude,—we may rest assured that in his childhood's days some fond parent instilled into his heart the fraternal precepts of "Little Bo-Peep."

HENRY PHILLIPS, JR.









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